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INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AND THE COMMUNITY COLLEGE.

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ANYTHING WHICH IS NOW, OR COULD BE, A PROBLEM OR AN ISSUE FOR THE INSTITUTION CONCERNED IS THE LEGITIMATE PROVINCE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH, WHICH IS THEREFORE A TYPE OF APPLIED RESEARCH TO PERFORM A SERVICE TO THE INSTITUTION. THE OFFICE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH SHOULD (1) PROVIDE DESCRIPTIVE REPORTS CONCERNING THE COLLEGE'S PRESENT STATUS AND THE DEGREE TO WHICH ITS GOALS ARE BEING MET, (2) ISOLATE INSTITUTIONAL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES, AND MAKE APPROPRIATE RECOMMENDATIONS, (3) IDENTFY IMMEDIATE AND FUTURE NEEDS, (4) COORDINATE INTRA- AND INTERINSTITUTIONAL STUDIES, (5) ASSIST STAFF MEMBERS IN THEIR STUDIES, (6) MAINTAIN AN UP-TO-DATE, USABLE FILE OF THE INSTITUTION'S RESEARCH, AND (7) PROVIDE A PERIODIC NEWSLETTER. THE OFFICE SHOULD BE OPERATED THROUGH A STAFF POSITION WHICH HAS NO OTHER POTENTIALLY CONFLICTING ROLE, IT SHOULD HAVE A SPEARATE BUDGET AND STAFF, AND THE DIRECTOR SHOULD HAVE AN ADMINISTRATIVE POSITION AT A LEVEL WHICH WILL FACILITATE COMMUNICATION. (WO)

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INTRODUCTION

The community college is fast emerging as one of the most important institutions on the American educational scene. All over the country such institutions are being planned and built to meet the needs of the communities they serve. In order to better understand these needs the planners of new community colleges and the administrative staffs of the already existing colleges are turning more and more frequently to institutional research.

This point in the evolution of the community college, therefore, seems opportune to ask some fundamental questions about the nature of institutional research. What institutional research is, what kinds of services should be provided by an institutional research office, where such an office fits in the larger organizational structure of the college; these are all concerns of vital importance to the institutions seeking to establish the institutional research function within their corporate limits. It is to these and other related issues that this paper is addressed.

DEFINITIONS OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH

There are two ways in which a given phenomenon may be delimited. On the one hand, it can be structured conceptually; it can be defined in terms of concepts which are themselves definable in terms of other concepts, etc. On the other, it can be structured operationally; being defined by pointing to it and saying, "that is X," or by demonstrating what it does. To use both methods in relation to a single phenomenon is, of course, somewhat redundant. However, the delimitation of institutional research requires this type of redundancy. The term itself is relatively new. More importantly, there is little agreement among those interested and/or engaged in institutional research as to what would constitute a simple, clear definition.

A CONCEPTUAL DEFINITION OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH: Of those conceptual definitions of institutional research which have been advanced, the best is the following from A. J. Brumbaugh:

> "(Institutional research consists of) Studies and investigations focused on current problems and issues in institutions of higher education (as well as) . . . studies and investigations of problems and issues that are basic to long-range planning or that may ultimately have implications for institutional operations." (1)

The first parts of this definition are easily understandable and acceptable to most college staff. It is, however, the last part of this statement that is most interesting and provocative. According to this last part, institutional research is concerned with problems and issues that may ultimately have implications for institutional operations. There is no guarantee that they will.

Implied here is the notion that institutional research is an investment. Sometimes investments show great profits; sometimes they show losses. Usually

they balance out with some margin on the profit side--provided the investments have been wise. Such is the case with institutional research. The potential is there, but there is a risk.

AN OPERATIONAL DEFINITION OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH: While the conceptual definition advanced by Brumbaugh represents an excellent starting point for discussion, there is much it leaves unsaid. It tells us, only in the most general way, what kinds of studies would be included under the label. Are there, for example, subject matter and procedural limitations on institutional research? Would it be legitimate to call a study of differential rest-room facility usage on the basis of age, sex, time of day, location of facilities, etc., institutional research?

The following list of titles, taken from the papers presented at the Third Annual National Institutional Research Forum, is illustrative of the types of studies which come under the general heading: institutional research. (2) They delimit, rather well, the breadth of scope which characterizes the discipline.

Institutional Research: A Basis for Planning With Special Reference to the Large Public University.

Pre-Admissions Evaluation and College Scholastic Progress Patterns.

Planning College Facilities.

Needed Research in Special Areas: Faculty Characteristics, Non-Academic Personnel, Graduate Students.

Problems of New Faculty Members.

Faculty Satisfactions and Dissatisfactions: A Methodological Study.

Assessment of Faculty Satisfactions and Dissatisfactions Through Mobility Studies.

Student Follow-Up Studies - A Research Design.

Budgetary Implications of Faculty Load Studies.

Assessing the Effects on Learning of the Newer Media.

In short, anything which is now, or could be, a problem or an issue for the institution concerned is the legitimate province of institutional research. This last point is critical. It is one thing to speak of institutional research in a general way. It is another, albeit related, to speak of institutional research as a service geared to a specific institution.

Ultimately, however, institutional research is applied research. It is research that is not specifically designed to test theories or defend orientations, per se, of subject matter disciplines. Rather, it is a type of research which is designed to solve problems and make predictions. As such it is less concerned with isolating primary and secondary causes than it is with establishing predictive indices. If one is concerned with avoiding being caught in a downpour it is not necessary to know what "causes" rain. What is important is the ability to predict when it will rain. This is not to say that institutional research excludes studies which fall under the heading of "pure" research. It is merely to emphasize that pure research does not occupy the first position on a list of institutional research priorities.

INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH AND THE INSTITUTION

AS A SERVICE: If the studies conducted under an institutional research program do not provide information for those who need it when they want it--they have failed to satisfy their major reason for existence. The purpose of institutional research should not be "research for its own sake" to the detriment of

other service functions. An office of institutional research exists to serve the needs of its institution, regardless of the sources of those needs. Role reversal, as often occurs in the relationship between the isolation of factors related to a particular phenomenon and a technique for isolating those factors, should not be allowed to occur. If the relationship between the office of institutional research and the institution develops in such a way that the institution begins to exist to serve the needs of the research office, the institution will find itself in the unenviable position of having a tail which is capable of wagging the dog.

On the other hand, the relationship between the institution and the research office should not be one wherein the office is rigidly controlled by the larger organizational structure. If the organizational structure is such that recommendations for action derived from institutional research are constrained to fit vested interests--the institution need not invest funds in a research office. If the office of institutional research is to be of any value to its institution, its research must be honest and objective. If it merely substantiates, via data analysis, what the institution wants to have corroborated--the office becomes nothing more than a rather expensive rubber stamp at best. And, with still less desirable consequences, could develop into an elaborate defense mechanism for the prevailing "institutional neuroses."

AS A SOURCE OF INFORMATION: Apart from organizing and preparing descriptive reports on the college's current operations the types of tasks over which an office of institutional research has control will vary from institution to institution. However, there are a number of basic types of information retreval and coordination functions which are the legitimate sphere of the research office.

Studies conducted on institutional research topics in junior colleges in the West show the following distribution in order of frequency with which the topic was studied: Students, Curriculum, Enrollment, Faculty, Admissions, Physical Plant, Administration and Organization of the Institution, Relationships with Outside Agencies, Finance, and Teaching. (3) Each of these basic subject matter categories, of course, could be divided into sub-categories of types of studies. Students, for example, could be studied in terms of their demographic and psycho-social characteristics, the relationship of these factors to grade point averages, their relationship to grades in particular courses or clusters of courses, their relationship to over- and underachievement, etc. Obviously, the number of different types of relevant studies that could be conducted at any given time in a particular institution is enormous. The small institutional research office which characterizes the best situations current in junior colleges could not hope to conduct all, or even most, of these studies. However, it can provide a vital coordination and leadership function; particularly with reference to aiding the planning, execution, data analysis, and write-up operations necessary to transforming an idea into an existential phenomenon.

All too often excellent research ideas that are present in the minds of the faculty and administrative staff of the college become nothing more because of the lack of sufficient institutional resources to realize them. The office of institutional research serves better than any other part of the organizational structure to bring about this realization. In addition to aiding the actual execution of the study, the office can provide information from other institutions on similar projects as well as providing information about past or current studies related to the propsed investigation done in its own institution.

Coordination of research within the college also allows the office of institutional research to be in an advantageous position for coordinating research between the college and other institutions. As a centrally located research clearing house the office has knowledge of all the institution oriented research completed and current within the college. Consequently it is better able than any other part of the organizational structure to provide individuals outside the structure of the institution with information about and the results of such research. By being in direct communication with other colleges on matters of institutional research the office also provides a vehicle for establishing and carrying out joint research projects between its college and these other institutions. The importance of this last function should not be overlooked. Often a research problem which is too complex and/or expensive for a single institution to cope with can be handled via inter-institution cooperation. Thus allowing the institutions concerned to expand the limits of the resources available to them at little or no additional cost.

The office of institutional research can also provide other information related functions which different parts of the organizational structure, because of the lack of sufficient resources--most critically time, are unable to accomplish. The isolation of the various strengths and weaknesses of the college's current modus operandi is vital if the institution is to have effective utilization of its available resources. Such research, designed to analyze the institution's current patterns of operation, also results in the isolation of another critical type of information--the college's immediate and future needs. Early discovery of such needs is essential if the institution is to remain viable vis-a-vis its goals and the communities it serves. In addition, the isolation of future needs allows for the design of studies which will provide important

information before it is actually required. Thus aiding, considerably, the ease with which the processes of organizational development and adjustment may be accomplished. Such studies constitute what may be called "preventive research;" like the safety-play in Bridge they are not always required but they tend to guarantee the contract.

Another important function, alluded to earlier, is the provision of a centrally located research file. Such a file guarantees that desired information, once accumulated, will be available when it is needed. All too frequently a request for a copy of a study completed some time in the past is answered with, "I am sorry but I am unable to locate any copies of the report you wish to examine." Sometimes the reply reflects the prior distribution of all available copies. On other occasions, however, such a reply is necessitated by the misplacement of copies in the normal periodic reorganization of office facilities. A centrally located research file in the office of institutional research would protect against such eventualities. In addition, such a file aids in avoiding the unnecessary duplication of research. Needed research is expensive enough. Unnecessary research is simply a waste of the institutions resources.

Finally, community colleges are often spoken of as teaching institutions. As such they tend to place research low on the list of priorities. Many faculty members have no idea of how research is done or what it can accomplish. Often their lack of information makes individual faculty members shy away from reading research studies, let alone allow themselves to get involved in the conduct of one, and suspicious of those who attempt to do research on them and/or what they do. Obviously, the studies kept in the research file of the office of institutional research will be of little value if the college's staff are unaware that they exist.

These problems can be overcome, at least in part, via the periodic circulation of a short "newsletter" on research just completed, currently in progress, and/or planned for the immediate future. Such a newsletter should contain brief descriptions of the studies and short summaries of the results of completed analyses. In this manner the institution's staff would not only be aware of what is going on research wise, but would become accustomed to the whole idea of research--especially institutional research.

In short, then, the office of institutional research should at least provide the following types of information and information related services:

1. The organization and preparation of descriptive reports on the college's status with respect to its current operations and the degree to which the institution's goals, both explicit and implied, are being met.

2. The isolation of strengths and weaknesses of the college's current operations with recommendations, where possible, about courses of action which will support the continued existence of the strengths and correct the discovered weaknesses.

3. The discovery of immediate and future needs of the institution with recommendations on how these might be met.

4. The planning and execution of studies designed to provide information which might, but not necessarily, be needed at a future time.

5. The coordination of intra- and inter-institutional research.

6. The provision of assistance to any staff members in the planning, execution, data analysis, and write-up of studies they would like to conduct or in which they are currently engaged.

7. The maintenance of an up-to-date research file on all the studies conducted in the institution in such a manner that the information contained in the reports is available to those who need it.

8. The periodic circulation of a newsletter on research just completed, currently in progress, and/or planned for the immediate future.

AS PART OF THE ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE: Where institutional research fits in the larger organizational structure has been a question which is relative to the specific institution. Professor Johnson, in his study, found the following distribution in order of frequency of staff members responsible for maintaining files on research reports: Staff Member, President, Dean of Instruction, Dean of Student Personnel or Member of his Staff, Coordinator of Institutional Research, Librarian, Vice-President, Business Officer, Director of Educational Services, Director of Public Relations, and Registrar. (4) Obviously, different institutions have different ideas about where the institutional research responsibilities ought to be located in the organizational structure. Often, however, such decisions are based more on expediency than they are on service to the institution.

Institutional research is becoming fashionable. Due to pressure from expanding enrollments, mounting educational costs, public criticism of education in the United States, the belief among educators that improvement is necessary, and perhaps most importantly the developing tendency for administration to be based on information rather than authority, someone in the organizational structure of every community college is being given, or will be given, the responsibility for coordinating institutional research activities. The major issue is who should that someone be.

First, regardless of the title, the responsibility of operating the office of institutional research ought to be through a staff position. The place of the institutional research office in the larger organizational structure should be such that the director has no other potentially conflicting role. It is difficult enough to conduct "value free" research. The delegation of the research responsibility to a system component which has other primary responsibi-

lities only aggravates this difficulty. Consequently, the office of institutional research should be separated from other branches of the administrative structure such as instruction or student personnel and placed under a director or coordinator of institutional research.

Second, the office of institutional research ought to have a separate budget and staff. This would allow the institutional research function to be responsible to the institution as a whole rather than some part of it. In addition, it would not tie up resources which are necessary for the operation of the other facets of the college's program.

Finally, the director of institutional research ought to be high enough in the administrative hiearchy that his official channels of communication do not involve a multitude of upward steps. Such placement would help to avoid the likelihood of delays in the distribution of information to relevant parties in the organizational structure--delays which could make the information outdated by the time it gets where it is supposed to go.

In addition, while much information is transmitted through informal communication channels such practices can have serious consequences for the institution when the role players are changed. The formal communication channels, therefore, must not only be delimited but operative as well. This is not to say that informal communication channels should not be used. Only that they cannot do the job by themselves.

Ultimately, these latter issues of where the office of institutional research fits in the larger organizational structure will be the most difficult for the college to resolve. There are no simple answers. Each institution must fit such a position into its own--relatively unique--administrative structure. Perhaps a series of trial arrangements will be necessary before the best

situation is discovered. Specific institutions can get help from those who already have an office of institutional research operating. In the last analysis, however, what finally comes to pass will be the responsibility of the college's own administrative staff.

SUMMARY

This report has attempted to get at some of the issues involved in the operation of the institutional research function in the community college. Its purpose is not to settle these issues, but to bring them out into the open where they may undergo further scrutiny. In essence, a model of the institutional research function has been advanced--a model which may not be completely applicable to any given institution. Nevertheless, through the analysis of such a proposal--in relation to the needs of our own institutions--we may be able to design offices of institutional research which are capable of providing the kinds of research services which the community college of today requires.

FOOTNOTES

1. Brumbaugh, A. J., RESEARCH DESIGNED TO IMPROVE INSTITUTIONS OF HIGH LEARNING, American Council on Education, Washington, D. C., 1960, p. 2.

2. Lins, L. Joseph, ed., THE ROLE OF INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH IN PLANNING, (Proceedings of the Third Annual National Institutional Research Forum, McGregor Conference Center, Wayne State University, May 5-7, 1963), Office of Institutional Studies, The University of Wisconsin, 1963, p.i.

3. Johnson, B. Lamar, "Institutional Research In The Junior Colleges Of Western States," in INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH IN THE JUNIOR COLLEGE, Occasional Report Number 3, Junior College Leadership Program, School of Education, University of California, Los Angeles, June, 1962, p. 25.

4. Ibid., p. 24.